



Appearance and the Transition to Motherhood:
An Exploration of Identity Construction among New Mothers

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Becoming a mother is a life-changing experience, and one that has a profound effect on a woman's identity. New mothers experience a loss of autonomy, changes in relationships, and often undergo major physical changes (Ogle, Tyner, & Schofield-Tomschin, 2011; Patel, Lee, Wheatcroft, Barnes, & Stein, 2005). At the same time, as a consumer segment, this group possesses \$16 billion in purchasing power (Time to Earn, 2013). Because new mothers are faced with having to shape a new identity, that of "mother," this group is likely looking for ways to use appearance and appearance-related products to not only ease the transition to motherhood but to ultimately shape their resulting identities (Stone, 1962).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what it is like to be a new mother and to consider the role of appearance in this experience. The three objectives of the study were: (1) to examine how new mothers use appearance to establish identity, (2) to investigate the meanings new mothers assign to appearance, and (3) to understand the role of these meanings in shaping their identities as new mothers. Substantial research exists that focuses on the experience of being a mother, and on the many physical, emotional, and mental changes that women typically go through. Yet few studies are concerned with *becoming* a new mother, or how the identity of a new mother might be developed and conveyed through appearance and what this means in the context of new motherhood. This study therefore fills a void in the literature by deepening our understanding of how a woman's identity during motherhood, a fundamental transition period in her life, is shaped by and through her experiences with it.

Upon IRB approval from the researchers' university, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 women who had become mothers for the first time within six months of recruitment. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and lasted between 1-2 hours. Questions covered topics ranging from the importance of clothing in general, to the initial transition to motherhood and changes in consumption, to body satisfaction and the influence of others on appearance. Two focus group sessions of 4-5 women each were also conducted and lasted between 1½ to 2½ hours each. Each focus group session was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Focus group sessions focused on topics similar to the in-depth interviews, but provided an additional data collection platform that allowed for a deep and meaningful group discussion about the experience of becoming a new mother. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed together for emergent themes across the responses (Spiggle, 1994). As a result of this iterative process of analysis, three main themes were identified and were used to structure the interpretation: *New Motherhood and the Self, Just the*

Two of Us, and Me, Baby, and the World. The broader conceptual and theoretical relevance of the interpretation was then considered within a social psychological framework (Stone, 1992).

In *New Motherhood and the Self* participants' experiences with changes in body size and shape, time management, and beauty routines are examined relative to the transition to motherhood. In *Just the Two of Us*, the relationship between the new mother and her baby is examined, as she experiences a shift in focus from herself to another, including addressing baby demands, dressing like a mom, and frustrations with engaging in daily activities, such as shopping, with the baby. In *Me, Baby and the World*, the influence of others on a new mother's identity, and the role that societal expectations play in shaping a new mother's identity are examined. Findings indicate that, as new mothers, many participants feel as though they can better navigate the transition to motherhood if they are "in control" of the experience. In contrast, other participants are more ambivalent about the motherhood journey and view this transition as temporary. In both cases, appearance is used to communicate the new role of mother. Moreover, it was found that a new mother's identity is fluid, rather than fixed. As new mothers, nearly all participants felt overwhelmed and looked to their pre-baby selves as a means of articulating their ideal postpartum selves, suggesting a disconnect between the two selves and a difficulty with expressing the new identity as "mother." Finally, data interpretation revealed the extent to which the baby plays a major part in how a new mother "performs" (Stone, 1992) her new role when around others, including focusing attention on her baby's appearance instead of her own.

Becoming a mother is a very private experience that is often enacted in a very public way. Findings expand the conceptual scope of the literature on appearance and identity by exploring motherhood as a period of sudden and acute identity transformation. Findings of this study also offer important managerial implications. Notably, the new mothers in this study frequently mentioned being dissatisfied with the options in postpartum clothing. In contrast to the maternity market, very few stores offer styles designed for new mothers. It would therefore be beneficial to offer this consumer segment clothing that is comfortable, stylish, and conducive to a new mother's needs, such as breastfeeding. Further inquiry into the relationship between new motherhood, appearance, and identity is needed, as it will continue to shed light on how women experience this important and incredibly transformative journey.

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